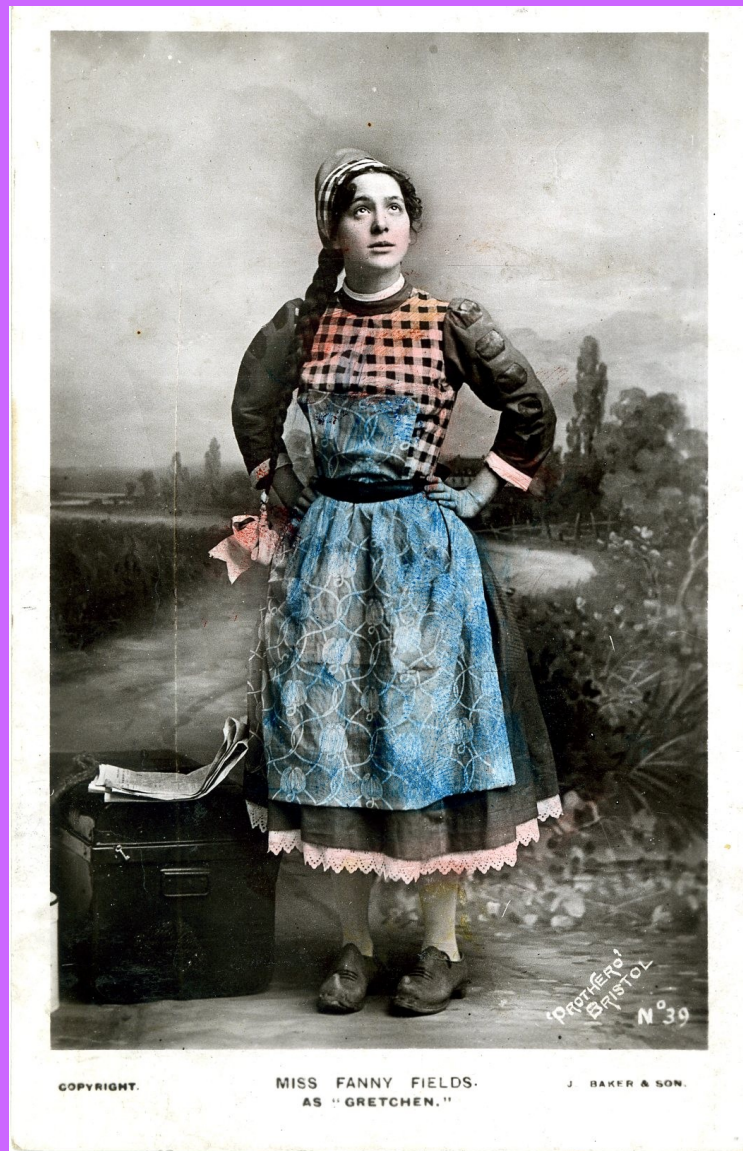


Happy Fanny Fields



A Brief Biography,
by Michael L. Jackson, Adlington
(Lancashire), September 2021

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Miss Fanny Fields as "Gretchen", posted in 1906

Cover: original colourised card of Miss Fanny Fields, also posted in 1906

Introduction

Stage entertainer Fanny Fields was born Fanny Furman in New York City. Some sources quote 1881 or 1882, though *Wikipedia* gives the specific date of 15th September 1880. Her family was Jewish, of Polish and German heritage, and she impersonated Jewish and German characters as part of her act at times. However, Fields' speciality was 'an impression of a naïve, working-class American-Dutch woman. This character, sometimes called Gretchen, spent much time contemplating the actions of a sweetheart named Schultz who Fields described as "the type of Dutchman who thought slowly, spoke badly, and drank lager perfectly."' (New York Public Library)

Fanny Fields is said to have performed in public for the first time at the age of eleven, in the early 1890s. By the end of the decade, she was appearing professionally in variety shows in New York. She was not "top of the bill", but her impersonations of German or Dutch girls, and her singing and dancing, seem to have been appreciated.

In 1901 she travelled to England, where she appeared at The Oxford in London, and shortly afterwards the Tivoli as well. It was not unusual for music hall performers to perform short acts in two or more halls in the same evening, especially if the halls were in the same vicinity.

Reviews in British newspapers confirmed that she wore clogs as part of her character costume, and also performed a clog dance. Unfortunately such reviews rarely gave much detail about the style of clog dancing, and in some cases were misleading. A real Dutch girl would have worn solid wooden *klompen*, often described as *sabots* in newspapers. Some reviews implied that her clogs were heavy and clumsy. However, photographs of Fanny Fields wearing them show that they were British clogs with wooden soles but leather uppers, modified to look like wooden *klompen*. Clogs of this type were worn by actresses such as Miss Isobel Jay in "Miss Hook of Holland" from 1906 onwards. As Fanny Fields had been performing throughout Britain as a Dutch girl in clogs for several years before "Miss Hook" was first performed, it seems possible that her act might have been the inspiration for the musical. As a dancer, Fields was an inspiration to other performers. She had not been performing in England for long before other entertainers were said to be impersonating her or performing Dutch characters in her style.

On 20th February 1933, the *Daily Mirror* interviewed Joshua Hallam, a clog maker with premises on Waterloo Road, London. His family originated in Wigan, Lancashire, but several of them relocated to London in the late 1850s. Customers of the Hallams' business were said to include Dan Leno, Little Tich, Happy Fanny Fields, and even Lily Langtree. It seems unlikely that the Hallams, a Lancastrian family, would have been carving solid wooden *klompen*, for Fanny Fields, but no doubt were a source of clogs with leather uppers, which would have been more suitable for dancing on music hall stages than *klompen*.

The following photograph is of the style of clog worn on the stage in the early twentieth century by performers appearing as Dutch characters.



Imitation “Dutch” clog with leather upper, as worn by early twentieth century stage performers

Performances by Fanny Fields are recorded thousands of times in newspapers, in particular those between 1899 and 1913. Some reports reviewed her act in a little detail, but many simply mentioned that she was on the bill at a particular theatre or music hall. I have included a selection of the reports and advertisements.

Performances in the United States of America

Fanny Fields had acquired the nickname “Happy” by the late 1890s. This was said to be as a result of her infectious laugh, which became part of her stage act.

AMERICAN MUSIC HALLS.

NEW YORK ... Kasten, Duey, and Kasten introduce a novelty act ... which comprises duets, character changes, N***** melodies, and buck dancing. The Virginia Trio appear in a plantation sketch, which includes some good banjo playing. The other performers are Happy Fields, German comedienne ...

The Era, 18th November 1899 (extract)

Newspaper reviews mentioned that she appeared on stage as German or Dutch characters, and was a singer and dancer.

AMERICAN MUSIC HALLS. (FROM OUR AMERICAN CORRESPONDENT.)

... at the Lion Palace Roof garden this week ... Fanny Fields, Dutch singer and dancer ...

The Era, 23rd June 1900 (extract)

**AMERICAN VAUDEVILLE.
(FROM OUR OWN CORRESPONDENT.)**

... At Proctor's Fifth-avenue Theatre this week ... Fanny Fields, Dutch character singer and dancer ...

The Era, 21st July 1900 (extract)

Later reviews of performances in the USA also noted that her act had an element of comedy.

... Happy Fanny Fields joked and sang and danced in her off-hand Dutch way, and won plenty of applause. ...

Music Hall and Theatre Review, 21st September 1900 (extract)

Performances in Britain and Ireland

Happy Fanny Fields first performed in England at the Oxford music hall, though no details of her act were given.

THE OXFORD.— ... Happy Fanny Fields ...

The Stage, 23rd May 1901 (extract)

She was soon appearing at the Tivoli as well as the Oxford, and this review in June 1901 confirmed that her act included a clog dance.

Music Halls

TIVOLI.— ... Miss Fanny Fields, with her song, “Katarina,” and a well-executed clog dance fares very well ...

OXFORD.— ... Miss Fanny Fields' business, which includes some characteristic dancing, is smart and is well appreciated ...

London and Provincial Entr'acte, 1st June 1901 (extract)

Some reviews mentioned “characteristic dancing”, implying that she was performing in character, whether as a Dutch or German girl.

THE OXFORD.

... “Happy” Fanny Fields, as she is billed, scores here as at the Tivoli, and her characteristic dancing and all-round aptitude in dealing with serio-comic business assure her a hearty greeting. ...

The Stage, 6th June 1901 (extract)

In some reviews, her clog dancing was considered to be a factor which helped her to win favour with the music hall audiences. She continued to perform at both the Oxford and the Tivoli in London.

THE TIVOLI, STRAND, W.C.

... and FANNY FIELDS, “The jolliest little girl.” – *Era*. “No brighter artist.” – *Stage*. “Fresh and charming.” – *Topical Time* “A distinct acquisition.” – *People* “Won instant favour with her clog-dancing and witty stories.” – *Morning Post* ...

THE OXFORD.

BRILLIANT ATTRACTIONS.

... Happy Fanny Fields ...

Pall Mall Gazette, 21st June 1901 (extract)

This review indicates that she included a Jewish character in her act, no doubt drawing on her New York upbringing and family background.

HAPPY FANNY FIELDS has the most ingratiating way—you like her immediately ; but the better you know her the better you like her. This is remarkably apparent at the Tivoli, where Happy Fanny is exclusively engaged this week. Her performance with its wondrously life-like impersonations of Dutch and Hebrew folk and its wild dances, is excellent indeed. But Fanny's quaint little asides, tolerable only from a real favourite, have got to the heart of the Tivoli audience—shouts of laughter, as it might be at the pretty impertinences of a spoilt child, follow the little artiste's impromptus of wit and wisdom. She is by way of becoming one of the most popular favourites of the variety stage.

Music Hall and Theatre Review, 12th July 1901

This review mentions her “clog walloping”, but we are left wondering about the nature of her clog dancing.

THE OXFORD.

... Happy Fanny Fields in her sabot interlude gets away from the everlasting N***** and plantation ditty, and gives us a frank, joyous, and downright exhibition of clog walloping for which we tender our sincere thanks. Energy, according to the Eton boy in *Punch*, is such bad form, but in the case of Fanny, the Deutscher girl, it is decidedly refreshing. ...

The Era, 14th September 1901 (extract)

Having spent several months performing at both the Oxford and Tivoli in London, by the autumn of 1901 Fanny Fields was ready for a national tour, commencing in Leeds, Yorkshire.

FEW American artistes have so quickly and so firmly established themselves in the affections of English audiences as Happy Fanny Fields, the girl exponent of Dutch and Yiddish character. her engagement at the Oxford and the Tivoli has been again and again prolonged. Now she proceeds on the Moss Empires Tour, opening at Leeds on Monday.

Music Hall and Theatre Review, 27th September 1901

A Leeds newspaper confirmed that she was the leading attraction in the show at the Empire Palace, and that her act consisted of comedy and dancing.

The leading attraction at the Empire Palace this week is Miss Fanny Fields, the American-Dutch comedienne and dancer. She is quite an original artiste, who contrives to mix up the

English vocabulary in a delightfully humorous fashion. Her dancing, too, in cumbersome Dutch shoes, is likewise distinctly novel and clever. ...

Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer, 1st October 1901 (extract)

The tour continued, and she moved on to Scotland.

Happy Fanny Fields is by way of trying her humour on the Scotch. She is at the Empire, Glasgow, this week.

Music Hall and Theatre Review, 25th October 1901

Later in 1901, she crossed the Irish Sea to perform in Dublin.

EMPIRE PALACE THEATRE, LIMITED.— ... Happy Fanny Fields, the popular American Dutch comedienne, has made a big success here [Dublin, Ireland]. ...

The Era, 23rd November 1901 (extract)

She returned to London by 1902, and clog dancing continued to be part of her stage routine.

COLLINS'S.— ... and Happy Fanny Fields with her merry singing and clever clog dancing, creates an excellent impression. ...

London and Provincial Entr'acte, 31st May 1902 (extract)

The Stage referred to her “sabot dancing”, but it was not unusual for journalists to use the term for any style of clog dancing.

LONDON VARIETY STAGE. THE TIVOLI.

... Happy Fanny Fields delights her hearers with her pretty Dutch patter and sabot dancing. Little Tich creates screams of laughter. ...

The Stage, 7th August 1902 (extract)

The Tatler considered her clog dancing to be “extremely exhilarating”.

AN EVENING AT THE TIVOLI.

... Quite a delightful turn is that of Happy Fanny Fields, who is described as an “American Dutch Comedienne.” Fanny Talks in the Hans Breitmann lingo, but I do not know whether this is because she has adopted the language on purpose or because she cannot help it. Her clog dancing is extremely exhilarating, and her songs are amusing enough. But it is in her “patter” and the interjected remarks provoked by interruptions that Fanny scores. ...

The Tatler, 20th August 1902 (extract)

Performances by Fanny Fields were also reviewed in distant newspapers, such as the *New Zealand Mail*, but probably drew on material published by the English press.

That smart little American girl, Miss Fanny Fields, is again “working” the Tivoli and the Oxford with just as much success and applause as she won on her first visit to London last

year. Happy Fanny is still giving a burlesque imitation of a German Katrina (what a pity it is that she doesn't use the blue pencil now and again in her otherwise amusing patter !) and she wears a bright, rose-pink dress, with her two plaits of pretty brown hair tied with pale blue ribbon, and large brown clogs on her nimble feet. She is a little New Yorker, bubbling over with high spirits, quite young, unmarried and as frank, kind, and light-hearted a girl as it is possible to imagine. ...

New Zealand Mail, 26th November 1902 (extract)

Fanny Fields spent the next few years either performing in the London halls, in particular the Tivoli and the Oxford, or touring the provinces, as these reviews indicate.

LONDON VARIETY STAGE.

THE TIVOLI.

... There is surely no brighter or cleverer comedienne, in her own line of business, upon the stage than Happy Fanny Fields, who, with her quaint witticisms and her clog dancing, is delighting Tivoli patrons to the full. It is impossible to feel glum when she is facing the footlights, and she can make an audience laugh almost in spite of itself. ...

The Stage, 26th November 1903 (extract)

THE OXFORD.

... Happy Fanny Fields has added several new stories to her repertory, and concludes her turn with a skilful sabot dance to the strains of "Hiawatha." ...

The Stage, 12th May 1904 (extract)

TIVOLI.

... Miss Fanny Fields contributes the same old clog dance with interludes of comical confidences—and Hiawatha ! ...

Music Hall and Theatre Review, 13th May 1904 (extract)

One of the finest Dutch impersonators on the English-speaking stage is the American comedienne Happy Fanny Fields. She has got numerous imitators of her works in England, America and Australia, but not many, if there are any, superior.

New Zealand Mail, 12th October 1904

LEEDS. ...

PALACE ... Happy Fanny Fields heads the bill, and her dancing and quaint remarks make her a great favourite here. ...

The Stage, 23rd February 1905 (extract)

MUSIC HALLS.

... ARDWICK EMPIRE.—Happy Fanny Fields has returned to Manchester as mirthful as ever. Her humour is always good, and the extraordinary manner in which she tumbles and dances about the stage in her wooden clogs never fails to gain loud approbation. ...

Manchester Evening News, 6th June 1905 (extract)

In 1906, A. J. Mills and Bennett Scott wrote "By the Side of the Zuyder Zee" for Fanny Fields. This became her most successful song, though it is also associated with Maudie Darrell.

CARDIFF. ...

EMPIRE ... At the top of the programme this week is Happy Fanny Fields, who is as funny and vivacious as ever, and Cardiffians are always pleased to welcome her. ...

The Era, 13th July 1907 (extract)



Protheroe

MISS FANNY FIELDS

"Happy Fanny Fields" is appearing in the part of Mitzi in *The Girls of Gottenberg* at the Adelphi. "Happy Fanny" has earned the reputation of being the cleverest impersonator of Dutch character in England to-day. She is a magnificent clog dancer, and in *The Girls of Gottenberg* has added to her reputation with another undoubted success

The Tatler, 19th August 1908

DUBLIN.—GAIETY THEATER ... Happy Fanny Fields' embodiment of the innkeeper's daughter, Mitzi, invests the part with genuine ability, and she is vivacious and pleasing in her singing and dancing. ...

The Era, 31st October 1908 (extract)

NEW PALACE THEATRE

THERE are two crowded houses at the Palace Theatre in Baldwin St., nightly this week, the principal attraction being the world-renowned Happy Fanny Fields, the American Dutch girl. Her accomplishments are almost indescribable, but her admirers will recognise a few of her characteristic Dutch rolls, the inturned knees, the long plaits of hair with their ribbon adornments, the dainty Dutch cap, the extraordinary nimbleness of the feet enclosed in clogs, the winning smile, the indescribable laugh, and the sweet singing voice. It is as a little Dutch maiden that Fanny Fields has made her name, and, clever as her burlesque of the Suffragette is, it is in the first character that she is still best. Last night her admirers showered bouquets upon her, and she was highly delighted with the warmth of her welcome. If you want to really enjoy the evenings don't fail to have a look in at the Palace and see Happy Fanny Fields. ...

Bristol Magpie, 14th April 1910 (extract)

ARGYLE THEATRE OF VARIETIES

It is impossible not to be happy in the presence of Happy Fanny Fields ... this bright and gifted artist is the principal attraction ... this week ... Happy Fanny Fields has a surprising faculty for arousing mirth. ... She was delightful as a Dutch girl ...

Birkenhead News, 20th April 1910 (extract)

THE FORTY THIEVES.

... at the Prince of Wales Theatre, Birmingham. ... Happy Fanny Fields' laughter is infectious ; she is the life and soul of the pantomime. Her vivacity, her quaint accent, her be-ribboned plaits, and her clattering clogs, carry all before them. ...

Cheltenham Looker-On, 13th January 1912 (extract)

WHO'S WHO IN THE PROGRAMME.

International Artistes.

... Fanny Fields is an American Jewess, who has perfected a performance that is extremely popular in America. In baggy skirts and clogs, with her hair plaited, she becomes a Dutch girl, sings Dutch character songs, tells stories in the patois, and is a clever clog dancer. ...

Pall Mall Gazette, 1st July 1912 (extract)

In 1912, Fields performed her act before George V at the first Royal Command Performance, and subsequently this was reflected in her billing.

THE THEATRES.

A NIGHT AT THE COLISEUM.

... Of that "Royal Performance artiste"—as she is described in the programme—Happy Fanny Fields, I have nothing derogatory to say. Her irresponsible gaiety is as infectious as it is delightful. She outrages every canon of womanly grace and charm, as she flounders about in

her hideous clothes, white stockings, and clogs, and yet in some quaint, indescribable way, she is charming. ... Her gaiety is irresistible, and she radiates happiness. ...

Truth, 25th December 1912 (extract)

At the point when she had reached the peak of her fame, Fields decided to retire from performing. She returned to the United States to marry Dr. Abraham Rongy. This news appeared in several British newspapers, which gives a good indication of her popularity at that time.

HAPPY FANNY FIELDS.

"Jolly Dutch Girl" to Leave the Stage for Wedded Bliss

"Happy Fanny Fields" has stated at Harrogate that in a month's time she expects to retire from the stage. return to America. and marry.

The bridegroom-elect is a Dr. Rongy, whom she met during a recent holiday in the United States. She made her first public appearance since her return to England at the Kursaal, Harrogate, and in about a month, says *The Daily Mirror*, she will have completed all her contracts.

Asked if she intended to abandon the stage for good. she replied that she did. "I do not think I shall change my mind," she added.

Miss "Happy Fanny Fields" made her first appearance on the stage when she was eleven years of age at a German winter garden, called the Atlantic, in Broadway, New York.

The little singer and dancer was such a success that she continued to dance and sing, and was so lively and gay that she soon earned the prefix, "Happy," which she retained ever after for her "bill matter," as variety artists call it.

Miss Fields made her London debut at the Oxford Music Hall about twelve years ago. Since then she has toured and re-toured the British Isles and America with her "happy" act, and has played in British-made pantomimes.

She had the honour of appearing before the King and Queen at the command music-hall performance a year ago last July.

She is the beloved "Jolly Dutch girl" of the "halls," and almost invariably appears charmingly arrayed in clogs, plaits, and short Dutch dresses.

Evening News (London), 6th September 1913

Happy Fanny Fields is leaving the English stage, upon which she has been an attraction for many years, in order to return to America and marry. The lucky bridegroom-elect is the well-known New York surgeon, Doctor Rongy, and the wedding is expected to take place in November. Happy Fanny departing from these shores early in October.

Interviewed by a Press representative in Liverpool this week, the jolly little Dutch girl said that, though she was delighted at the prospect of joining the home circle, "it made her heart sick" to leave England and all the people who had been so kind to her. "I want," she said. "to thank everybody in this country for their great kindness to me. The English people have not only been kind, to me professionally, but also socially, and I have never been so happy as while I have been in England. It is my one regret that I have to leave."

Miss Fields came to England in 1901, since when she has made a host of friends, who, while wishing her everything good in her coming new role, can ill-afford to lose her. Everyone remembers that Fanny was in the Command Performance at the Palace Theatre, London, when she invited the occupants of the Royal Box, during her turn, to Cheer up! as she was suffering as well as Their Majesties! Now the clog is on the other foot. We suffer—as well as Fanny—through her leaving the English stage. She says she will not return. They all say that, but invariably do! We can only hope for the best.

Scottish Referee, 12th September 1913

Before retiring from performing, Fanny Fields appeared in a short film, “Happy Fanny Fields and the Four Little Dutchmen”, made by the Selsior company. This advertisement placed by Selsior confirms the content of the film, and the arrangements for hiring it. Unfortunately I have been unable to find video of this short online. It would have been very informative to have seen Fields’ clog dance.

Happy Fanny Fields

This world-famed artiste has been "taken" and appears in one of our new Dancing Films. These productions are the only dancing films which are produced and exhibited in a manner (protected under the Patent Act, 1907) ensuring perfect synchronism between music and dancers.

In the bottom left-hand corner of the screen the conductor appears, so that the pianist or orchestra actually take their time from the picture itself ; the conductor is no less a person than George R. Hatley, late Musical Director of the Holborn Empire, London, so that your music is actually under his able directorship, which, to say the least, means success.

The subject is 450 feet in length and embodies every perfection possible in films. First, the four little "Dutchmen," who appear dressed in their national costume and characteristic wooden clogs, are shown on the screen. Their actions are quaint and snappy, whilst their, pleasing expression and good humour is soon taken up by any audience.

After a while, Happy Fanny Fields, with her inimitable smile and personality, appears. She executes her famous Dutch dance as only she knows how ; emphasising those peculiar points that have made her dancing famous throughout the wide world, and the whole performance appears so artistic and natural that it is only when the picture comes to an end, the artistes disappear and the conductor makes his final bow, that one realises they have been watching the picture instead of dancers really "in the flesh."

The film is carefully overhauled every time it is let out on hire, and a perfect copy is thus guaranteed ; all scratched or worn copies are destroyed. With each film a piano copy and attractive posters (any number) are supplied free.

There is sure to be a great demand for this picture, and it is advisable to make early application for hire to SELSIOR LTD., 3 DENMAN STREET, PICCADILLY CIRCUS, LONDON, W. ('Phone : 1436 Regent) or GAUMONT FILM HIRE SERVICE, 6 DENMAN STREET, and Branches.

Kinematograph Weekly, 31st July 1913

Fanny Fields' Legacy

Fanny Fields was a very popular music hall performer in Britain and Ireland for a dozen years, and helped to popularise clog dancing in Dutch character. Ten years after she had retired from the stage, newspaper reviews still described those who danced in Dutch costume as doing so in the style of Fields.

... In characteristic Dutch costume, the Misses Stewart, who, as dancers were prime favourites, gave a delightful representation of clog dancing (à la Funny Fanny Fields). So persistent was the audience in its wealth of applause, that the girls were obliged to repeat the dance, which, on both occasions, was executed with a cleverness and euphonious precision which delighted everybody. ...

West Lothian Courier, 23rd February 1923 (extract)

By the 1930s, a new Fields was becoming a popular entertainer on the stage and on screen. Some even asked whether Gracie Fields was Fanny Fields' daughter!

Happy Fanny Fields was still remembered, but performed no more.

THE DAYS OF HAPPY FANNY FIELDS.

Fanny Fields was in great demand in the early years of the present century.

She broke new ground in variety and pantomime by appearing as a Dutch girl with plaited hair and wearing clogs. Her humour was of the broken Dutch variety accompanied by merry peals of laughter, and she sang in a clear, attractive voice. Her clog-dancing with the accompanying jokes and banter usually brought down the house.

Old pantomime-goers cannot fail to remember her ...

Western Daily Press, 4th January 1935

... Happy Fanny Fields was another American with a breezy manner. Her song "By the side of the Zuyder Zee" always got the audience singing. ...

Nottingham Evening Post, 21st January 1942

Back in the United States, her role in public life consisted of fundraising for various medical charities. Her husband died in 1949, as did she in 1961. US newspapers carried obituaries, though at present I do not have access to those.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the *British Newspaper Archive* and *Papers Past* (New Zealand) for quotations from newspapers, and the *BNA* for the photograph of Fanny Fields from *The Tatler*.

Thanks to *The New York Public Library (Archives & Manuscripts)* and *Wikipedia* for biographical information about Fanny Fields.

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Miss Fanny Fields in a postcard sent to Birmingham in 1913